

Pacific Standard

HOME > NEWS IN BRIEF

IF YOU SUPPORT PUBLIC LANDS, STEER CLEAR OF UTAH

The state's government has helped lead the war on national forests and other federal land. The outdoor recreation community is pushing back.

JIMMY TOBIAS · UPDATED: MAY 25, 2018 · ORIGINAL: JAN 24, 2017

Salt Lake City recently hosted Outdoor Retailer, the massive recreation industry trade show that takes place twice a year in the city's convention center and generates an annual \$45 million for Utah's economy. As thousands gathered to hit the slopes and test new winter gear from companies like REI, Mountain Hardware, and more, Peter Metcalf, the founder of Black Diamond and one of the industry's leading luminaries, dropped a bold bombshell.

In an op-ed published in the *Salt Lake Tribune* during the show's second day, he called on Outdoor Retailer to abandon Utah when its convention center contract comes up for renewal in 2018.

"It's time," he said, "for Outdoor Retailer to leave the state in disgust." His words were soon echoed by other industry leaders, including Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard, who said the trade show "can find a more welcoming home."

The source of their discontent is simple: Utah's sustained war on public lands and federal conservation policy.

"Gov. Gary Herbert and Utah's D.C. delegation are leading a national all-out assault on the sanctity of Utah and the country's public lands," Metcalf wrote. "Together, Utah's political leadership has birthed an anti-public lands political agenda that is the driving force of an existential threat to the vibrancy of Utah and America's outdoor industry..."

Metcalf's assessment is accurate, and his prescription is on point. Federal lands are the economic backbone of the outdoor industry. They are a source of great fulfillment for its clients. Without them outdoor recreation as we know it would be finished. So, yes, Outdoor Retailer ought to get out of Utah altogether. And if that economic punishment isn't enough to convince Utah's leadership that its public lands policies are pure folly, then outdoor recreationists of all stripes — from skiers to backpackers to backcountry hunters and anglers — should consider boycotting the state outright.

After Metcalf's declaration appeared in print, Herbert immediately disputed it. The op-ed, it seems, unsettled him.

"There is no all-out-assault against Utah's public lands," said one of the governor's spokespeople in a statement to the *Salt Lake Tribune*. "Gov. Herbert has been clear that Utah is, always has been, and always will be a public lands state."

Despite his claims, however, Herbert's Utah is a bona fide breeding ground of anti-public-land extremism. The governor himself signed into law Utah's infamous 2012 Transfer of Public Lands Act, which demanded the federal government deliver most national forests and BLM parcels within state borders to the right-wing legislature's control. His administration and its Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office have also helped lay the groundwork for a federal lawsuit, which, if filed, would strive to force the same sort of large-scale land transfer in the courts. Utah's Congressional delegation, meanwhile, is the most radical anti-land, anti-wildlife faction in Washington. Led by Representative Rob Bishop, the chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources, Utah politicians have pushed to sabotage the Antiquities Act, the Endangered Species Act, and other key elements of America's conservation heritage.

The state is home to other anti-conservation crusaders as well, including the American Lands Council, which seeks to spread the land transfer idea into other Western states. That group, though a non-governmental organization, counts as dues-paying members many county governments across Utah.

Even though most of the aforementioned policies have yet to produce results, they've still managed to poison the rhetoric around federal lands. They have injected American discourse with a dose of extreme anti-government libertarianism that would railroad our land rights in the name of ideological purity and private gain. If you love to hunt or fish or ski or bike or hike or camp on the federal domain, Utah's government is against you.

Now, however, a backlash is building. The outdoor industry is a growing political force. Just last year, for instance, the Department of Commerce started compiling data on the economic benefits of outdoor recreation across the country. It was a key policy victory in the sector's struggle for official recognition. And this month the Outdoor Industry Association, the leading industry trade group, launched the "Together We Are a Force" initiative, which aims to rally outdoor retail companies to promote climate action, push for friendly trade policies and protect public land.

One early test of this new force will be whether it decides to pull out of Utah. OIA, which is Outdoor Retailer's principal organizer, indicated last week that it is open to the idea.

America's public lands "are critical and any threat to their protection is a threat to the outdoor industry," wrote OIA and Outdoor Retailer in a joint response to Metcalf's op-ed. "The Outdoor Industry Association and Outdoor Retailer will continue to listen to members and show attendee feedback on both the appropriate venue for the show as one factor along with considering the need to have the show in a location that meets the business requirements of the industry."

If Outdoor Retailer does leave Utah, one hopes the move might send Herbert a clear message: He is messing with the wrong community. Should it fail to do so, however, outdoor recreationists could ramp up the pressure with a prolonged Utah boycott.

Already the Center for Western Priorities, a non-partisan conservation organization, has urged outdoor enthusiasts to avoid Utah. The group's U-Turn Utah campaign has placed advertisements on billboards and in publications across the West, directing tourists to steer clear of the state until it changes its ways.

There's room to build on this work. People could convince their family and friends to forgo trips to Utah in 2017. Instead of visiting Zion or Arches or Grand Escalante, check out Glacier or Hells Canyon or the beautiful Boundary Waters. Instead of trout fishing or floating in the state, head to Montana or Idaho, which have better stream access laws anyhow. Instead of skiing or snowboarding at Park City, check out Big Sky, Crested Butte, or Jackson.

Recreationists could also appeal to people like Robert Redford, a well-known public lands supporter, who might encourage the Sundance Film Festival to temporarily leave the state. Sundance-in-exile could spend a few years in Bend or Santa Fe or the Colorado Rockies until Utah makes amends.

“Would a visitation boycott work? I don’t know. Could you convince people to travel elsewhere? I don’t know,” says Aaron Weiss, the media director at the Center for Western Priorities. “But if some people decide to go down the boycott road I certainly wouldn’t be surprised.”

Boycotts are powerful. Look at North Carolina, where a [national boycott](#) in response to the state’s transphobic “bathroom bill” helped lead to the recent electoral defeat of former Governor Pat McCrory. Unlike McCrory, Herbert was re-elected in November for a second full term as Utah’s governor. It’s not too late, nevertheless, to strike a little economic fear into the heart of his anti-conservation administration.